DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 183 980 CG 014 192

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TITLE Treatment of Helpless Children: Examination of Some Potentially Therapeutic Influences.
PUB DATE [79]
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (87th, New York, NY, September 1-5, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; *Attribution Theory; *Behavior Change; Behavior Patterns; Children; Comparative Analysis; Elementary School Students; *Motivation; *Performance; Statistical Analysis; *Student Behavior
IDENTIFIERS *Helplessness

ABSTRACT

Some children exhibit a pattern of debilitating behavior characterized as helplessness. Within an achievement context, such children can be observed to initiate few constructive activities, to work with little intensity on those activities already attempted, and to persist at a task only moderately--especially following failure. A stratified random sample of 54 public school children were studied within three different experimental conditions, in order to ascertain the relative effectiveness of each. The three conditions were an attribution-change group, a self-management group, and a positive reinforcement group. Results of multivariate analyses of nine dependent measures showed significantly "better" changes within the attribution group on qualitative-motivational indices, using variables related to initiation (number of math problems solved), persistence (amount of time-on-task activity), and carefulness (number of problems correct and a positive accuracy ratio). (Author)

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Treatment of Helpless Children: Examination of Some Potentially Therapeutic Influences.

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A subgroup of children enrolled within various special educational programs exhibit a pattern of debilitating behavior which can be characterized by helplessness. Within an achievement context, such children can be observed to initiate few constructive activities, to work with little intensity on those activities already started, and to persist at a task only slightly - especially after failure. Clinical observation of this group of children suggested that a key element in the development and maintenance of their poor motivation involved a self-perception of ineffectiveness. This self-perception was believed to be related to incorrect attribution of low ability as the source of the encountered success or failure, and hopelessness regarding personal control over these achievement outcomes. Particularly relevant to this observation are the treatment and theory studies pertaining to attribution theory (Weiner,1972). Since it was hypothesized that the child's causal ascriptions to success or failure situations played the major role in the child's expressed motivation, a treatment concerned with this influence was isolated and evaluated against certain other influences. Additionally, it was believed that the procedures of other treatments, while not derived from self-perception or attribution theory, were successful when their practices resembled those of attribution change.

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This study was an attempt to remedy patterns of helplessness within a sample of children, while comparing the therapeutic contributions of attribution change, an instructional strategy (self-management), and a control group consisting of reinforcement and practice. The attribution condition emphasized alterations of causal ascriptions away from low ability toward increased effort, through trainer's guided interpretations and exhortations. The self-management procedure taught children two problem strategies, and required children to enact these strategies in an overt, whisper and covert manner (Meichenbaum,1975). The control condition used positive reinforcement for correct answers and constructive work activity.

It was hypothesized that the attribution group would yield significantly better results than the other treatments on variables related to: initiation (number of math problems attempted); persistence (amount of time-on-task activity); and carefulness (number of problems correct, and an accuracy ratio of number correct in relation to number attempted).

Subjects.

Fifty-four subjects were chosen from 3 elementary schools of the 21 schools within the Pomona Unified School District. The district has a heterogeneous population of about 50% anglo and 50% mixed-minority population. Potential subjects were selected from either the 5th or 6th grades. The final sample consisted of 35 fifth graders (65%) and 19 sixth graders (35%). The ratio between boys and girls was 41 (76%) and 13 (24%) respectively. The sample was also stratified according to sex and degree of helplessness.

The sequence and manner of assessment is now described: After

elementary schools were selected at random, the first screening of potential subjects occurred through teacher ratings of helpless behaviors. For those children receiving a minimum score on the teacher ratings, informed consent notices were sent to parents. For all those students returning forms, subsequent testing was completed on the Wide Range Achievement Test, Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (yielding an IQ), an adapted version of the Intellectual Achievement Responsibility (IAR) Scale (Crandall,Katovsky and Crandall,1965), and a self-report measure of subject's causal attributions in response to achievement related situations. From this information, a composite helplessness score was assigned to each child and a list was arranged in hierarchial order. This was divided into three groups, with random assignment of each group into one of the three experimental conditions. An equal sex ratio was maintained for each of the nine groups (3 schools by 3 experimental conditions).

Procedure.

During the length of the experiment, the different experimental groups were controled for length of trainer interaction with the children, the difficulty of math problems used by all children, the amount of reinforcement received, and the level of pre-treatment math achievement and IQ. Experimental sessions occurred over ten days, for 5 consecutive days of two weeks. Each daily experimental session lasted one hour, during the morning, and within the same school but at different classrooms. Daily measures were gathered for all children within the context of a repeated measures design over ten days. Data gathered during the first three days was not influenced by experimenter manipulation, enabling a baseline estimate of the child's regular

performance. The next seven days included experimental manipulation and provided data for the treatment implementation phase.

Children spent time within each session involved in the following activities: the first fifteen minutes involved the use of commercially available math games, such as math puzzles and the use of various math-computational games. No measurement was obtained during this activity, although trainers attempted to foster the objectives of their respective conditions. The second block of 15 minutes was spent in the children working with a packet of individualized math computational problems, determined to be moderately difficult for each child. During this period of activity, trainers continued to foster each of their experimental objectives. The final block of time was spent in the children working with another packet of individualized math work, but with no experimenter promptings. All material was collected at the end of each day, enabling scoring for number of problems attempted, number of problems correct, their ratio, and during the last activity, the amount of time that was spent working out of possible 10 minute maximum. Each child received a separate packet of work sheets (non-timed) and timed math sheets every day: work sheets consisted of about 8 sheets which included pictures and other aids; timed sheets were about 5 pages in length and contained lists of computational problems. For the course of the 10 days, about 7,000 individual sheets were collated into 54 individual packets for each day (13 pages,54 subjects,10 days).

Following the session, children completed ratings concerning their activity for that day's work, while the trainers also completed ratings for the child's performance.

Experimental trainers were recruited from the UCLA Special Education Immersion Program. Prior to the beginning of the experiment, the writer met with volunteers from this program, and arrangements were made for experimental group assignment and meeting a minimal level of mastery for that group's objectives.

To determine group assignment, each volunteer was tape recorded on their response to a hypothetical problem that a school age child was experiencing; this response was played to two regular school classes, whose members rated each volunteer on separate questions pertaining to the children's perception of how helpful they thought each volunteer was in his/her response. From these ratings, a list of most-to-least helpful trainers was compiled; assignment was then made to each experimental condition to insure comparable levels of helpfulness and equal sex ratios.

Before the beginning of the experiment, trainers were engaged in 18 hours of training, and then tested for their mastery of the experimental objectives. Tests were performed according to role playing as well as written exercises, with a minimum mastery score of 90% necessary on both parts before inclusion.

Scripts for specific trainer behavior within each condition was used during the training. In this way the independent variable was made consistent across all trainers and all experimental groups.

The salient aspects of the 3 experimental groups were: for the attribution group, the trainer used specific interpretations and exhortations to foster personal responsibility within achievement situations, through guiding attributions increasingly toward greater effort, and less toward low ability. The self-management condition

taught children to problem-solving strategies, and helped them to perform these skills in an overt, whisper and then covert manner. The control group was primarily reinforcement for correct work and constructive work, for comparable interactions with the trainer.

Results.

Primarily, analysis of covariance was used to examine the various hypotheses that were made in favor of the attribution group over the other 2 experimental groups. These hypotheses included: greater motivational initiation (measured through number of problems attempted on timed and non-timed activities); greater motivational carefulness (measured by the number of problems correctly solved and the accuracy ratio of number attempted over number correct); greater motivational persistence (measured by time-on-task activity).

Concerning the first hypothesis, COVAR* showed no significant main treatment effect on either timed or non-timed activity, but a significant interaction effect was noted for work sheet activity ($p > .01$).

Concerning the second hypothesis, COVAR showed significant effects on three of the four dependent measures: one of the number correct measures and both accuracy-ratio measures ($p > .01$).

Concerning the third hypothesis, COVAR showed a significant effect for both treatment groups compared to the control group ($p > .01$).

No significant effects were noted on either the children's ratings or the trainer's ratings.

COVAR was also performed to rule out any baseline differences in

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* COVAR examined the dependent variable performance during the implementation phase data, while holding constant baseline data.

IQ or math achievement level, and in whether there were motivational differences in whether a child performed comparably at different grade-difficulty levels.

Conclusions.

These results show that attribution change produced significantly better results than either another treatment or a control group, especially in qualitatively related variables. Such findings are consistent with observations of many other writers who generalize the finding that strict behavioral approaches may be important for acquiring a previously unknown behavior, while more cognitive approaches are important for maintaining already acquired behavior, or refining its nature (E.g., Chapin and Dyke, 1976).

Attributionally related changes were considered a foundation upon which later skills could be built, as through modeling or self-management techniques. The motivational core necessary for such activities, however, appears to require cognitve alterations,such as those fostered by attribution change. Since many current programs treat children with educational problems largely through instructional techniques, the findings seem especially relevant.

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